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WITHIN-CLASS GROUPING  
IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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WITHIN-CLASS GROUPING  
IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A PAPER  
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF  
EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
IN EDUCATION 481

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
MASTER OF SCIENCE IN EDUCATION

PLAN B

BY

BILL E. SARGENT

AUGUST, 1961

## PREFACE

The goal which every good elementary school strives toward is to provide the physical and the social environment which will facilitate maximum growth and development for every boy or girl. It is toward this end that teachers and administrators wisely bend their best efforts. In providing a good environment for children, we should have the child compete, not with youngsters above or below his level but with youngsters at his level and with himself. Therefore, we find youngsters being grouped so that they will be with children of their own abilities, and as a result, be further stimulated toward success.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Helen H. Heffernan, "Grouping Pupils for Well-rounded Development," Education Digest, XVIII (March, 1953), pp. 37-39.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. PURPOSES AND TYPES OF GROUPING. . . . .	1
STATEMENT OF PURPOSE. . . . .	1
PURPOSES . . . . .	1
TYPES. . . . .	2
II. BASES OF FORMING INTRACLASS GROUPS. . . . .	6
STANDARDIZED TESTS. . . . .	6
PAST ACHIEVEMENT. . . . .	9
INTEREST. . . . .	11
SPECIAL NEEDS. . . . .	12
SEX. . . . .	13
ACCIDENTAL HOMOGENEOUS METHOD. . . . .	14
III. PROBLEMS IN INTRACLASS GROUPING. . . . .	16
SIZE AND NUMBER. . . . .	16
TIME. . . . .	18
NAMES. . . . .	19
MATERIALS. . . . .	19
FLEXIBILITY. . . . .	20
CURRICULUM. . . . .	20
EVALUATION. . . . .	22

## TABLE OF CONTENTS (CONT'D)

CHAPTER	PAGE
IV. CONCLUSION. . . . .	23
BIBLIOGRAPHY. . . . .	26

## CHAPTER I

### PURPOSES AND TYPES OF GROUPING

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE.        The purpose of this paper is (1) to define and point out the advantages of heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping (2) to discuss the bases for homogeneous grouping within a heterogeneously formed class (3) to discuss problems which arise from regrouping students homogeneously within a heterogeneously formed self-contained classroom.

PURPOSES.        In defining the purpose of grouping, the idea that grouping is an end in itself should be abandoned; instead, one should think of grouping as a means to an end, that end or purpose being to adapt the curriculum and learning environment to the abilities and needs of individual pupils, and to provide appropriate means for fostering their continuous development.<sup>1</sup>

Otto<sup>2</sup> has pointed out a second purpose of grouping, that being to facilitate the execution of the educational policy. Many school systems

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Clare Petty, Intraclass Grouping in the Elementary School, (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas, 1953), pp. 7-9.

<sup>2</sup> Henry J. Otto, Elementary School Organization and Administration, (III; New York, New York: Appleton-Century-Crafts, Inc., 1954), pp. 167-168.

believe that a different curriculum should be provided for different ability level students. This calls for different materials and new methods of instruction. It also calls for students being selected or grouped by the school and its personnel.

**TYPES.** There are two distinct types of grouping, heterogeneous and homogeneous. Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary defines these two terms as:

Heterogeneous - differing or opposite in structure dissimilar; composed of unrelated or unlike elements or parts.<sup>1</sup>

Homogeneous - of the same character, structure, quality; composed of similar or identical elements or parts; uniform.<sup>2</sup>

From the definitions stated above, heterogeneous grouping for educational purposes can be defined as the bringing together of pupils who are not similar in such factors as ability, experiences, and industry, while homogeneous grouping is the bringing together of pupils who are similar in such factors as ability, experiences, and industry.

There are advantages in heterogeneous grouping, one being that it is truly a life situation. Children of all ages and abilities play together, and in later life adults of all ages and abilities work together and compete.

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<sup>1</sup> Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, Jean L. McKechnie, (II; New York, New York: The Publishers Guild, Inc., 1959), p. 855.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 871.



Therefore, all children should spend some time in working with all types of students, because almost any activity, or for that matter, almost any position of leadership in later life, involves working with a cross-section of humanity.<sup>1</sup>

Another argument for heterogeneous grouping is that this type of grouping does not affect the child's social status among his peers. It is suggested in the preceding statement that a child in a heterogeneous class will not be labeled. At least, he is not as apt to be labeled as the child who is a member of the slow homogeneous group.

A final argument in favor of heterogeneous grouping is that there is no concentration of behavior problems. At least, the discipline problems would be less in comparison to a slow homogeneous group. Too many times the poorer academic students are discipline problems.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to heterogeneous grouping, is homogeneous grouping, and there are also advantages to this method of grouping. Among these is the fact that a child can compete with peers that share his limitations;

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Essex, "How Good is Ability Grouping?", National Parent Teacher, XXXXIV (September, 1959), pp. 14-19.

<sup>2</sup> Clayton E. Buell, "How Much Homogeneous Grouping in the Junior High?", National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin, XXXXIV (April, 1960), pp. 257-258.

thus, he will acquire some sense of achievement.

Another advantage for homogeneous grouping is that it makes possible for all segments of the class to receive a more nearly equal amount of the teacher's time. In contrast, a teacher in a heterogeneous situation may tend to teach the average child and neglect the upper and lower segments of the class. As a result, there may be less achievement by the slow and fast learners.<sup>1</sup>

A third advantage for homogeneous grouping is that students, after being grouped with students of their own ability, will find that they must exert themselves and work up to their capabilities and aptitudes in order to stay abreast of their classmates. This situation will give an over-complacent individual a more realistic view of himself. Many times the child, by realizing his faults and capabilities, will, by his own initiative, strive to improve his school work.

It should be pointed out that a clear advantage for either form of grouping has not been proven. Thus, because of a lack of evidence in either's favor, an accurate conclusion cannot be drawn as to which is the better method. However, it is generally agreed among educators that

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Wrightstone, "Class Organization for Instruction", What Researchers Say to the Teacher, (Vol. XIII; Washington: National Education Association, 1957), pp. 8-9.

grouping is on the increase. Also, there is evidence that some teachers tend to react more favorably to teaching groups in which the heterogeneity has been somewhat reduced, than to teaching groups selected at random.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John I. Goodlad, "Classroom Organization," Encyclopedia of Educational Research, ed. Chester W. Harris (New York, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), p. 224.

## CHAPTER II

### BASES OF FORMING INTRACLASS GROUPS

Most elementary classes are grouped heterogeneously. This is usually done by the principal or another school administrator. When the child is placed in his self-contained classroom the teacher can, and often does, regroup the students. It is toward this regrouping that the remainder of this paper will be directed.

There is no one criterion that can be used effectively to separate a class into homogeneous groups within the classroom; therefore, many methods must be considered. Those which are discussed in this paper are: standardized tests, past achievement, interest, special needs, sex, ability, and accidental homogeneous grouping.

STANDARDIZED TESTS. Before grouping a teacher wishes to obtain advanced information concerning the proficiency of his class in certain subjects and their general preparation for the work. It is essential for the teacher to know their strengths, in some detail, in order to direct their work so that the best results will be obtained.<sup>1</sup> One means used to

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<sup>1</sup> Harry A. Greene, Albert N. Jorgensen, and J. Raymond Gerberich, Measurement and Evaluation in the Secondary School, (New York, New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1954), p. 106.

obtain this information is the achievement test battery.

By the use of the achievement test battery, it is now possible to diagnose disabilities with practical accuracy in the fields of arithmetic, reading, language, science and social studies. The achievement test battery does not point out individual student weaknesses and strengths. Instead, the test is used for diagnosis of a class rather than diagnosis of an individual pupil. The class averages on the various subjects may provide a useful picture of general strengths and weaknesses. In the combined results for the group, chance errors of measurement tend to cancel out. Even a relatively unreliable test is adequate to bring out group or class differences. The profile, representing the average for the class, may indicate to the teacher or principal relatively specific strengths and weaknesses of the class as a whole, thus, providing cues for needed class activities.<sup>1</sup>

Another standardized test used to group students is the intelligence test. This test seeks to discover the capabilities of individual pupils. In dealing with an intelligence test, which is concerned with the individual pupil, the question of test reliability arises. A test is reliable to the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Thorndike, Measurement and Evaluation in Psychology and Education, (New York, New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1960), pp. 289-290.

extent that an individual remains nearly the same in repeated measurements. It is possible to compute the probable error in a given test. One way the error can be computed is by testing at different times using different forms of the test. There will conceivably be a difference in the two test results. This difference, on the basis of an entire class, can be used to predict a standard error of measurement. Of course, if a large number of tests are given, one may more accurately predict the standard error of measurement.<sup>1</sup>

In order to obtain accurate intelligence test results, a teacher must administer the test properly. A teacher must step from his role of teacher and become an examiner. As an examiner, his purpose is not to guide the pupil in learning, but the purpose is to obtain a valid understanding of his abilities. A child should be encouraged to respond to the best of his ability on each test item so that the test score will not be lower for any other reason than sheer lack of ability.<sup>2</sup>

Intelligence tests can be given individually or to an entire group. An individual test is preferred; although, because of the lack of time,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> Marion Monroe, Growing Into Reading, (New York, New York: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1951), pp. 230-231.

and trained personnel, it is not practical. In administering a test to the entire group, teachers must remember that test results will be less reliable than individual tests.<sup>1</sup>

It is advantageous for the teacher himself to give standardized tests. The value in giving the test is that a teacher will realize the testing situation. Conditions of illness, frustration, or excitement will be noticed; thus, the teacher will expect results according to the existing situation.

In regard to scoring tests, teachers may score or have tests scored for them by machine. The major issue is that, regardless of who scores the tests, the results should be used. The value of any educational test is directly proportional to the extent to which the results from its use are translated into improved instructional practices in the school. If these practices bring about improvement in the conditions under which teachers teach and children learn, the primary functions of the testing situation will have been realized.<sup>2</sup>

**PAST ACHIEVEMENT.** A second basis for grouping is past achievement. This can be obtained through the use of cumulative records

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>2</sup> Greene, Jorgensen and Gerberich, op. cit., p. 105.

and through former teacher recommendation. The evidence points to the fact that this can be a very effective basis for grouping.

The cumulative record will contain many facts and statistics related to the child's history and background.

Test items, such as achievement test results, intelligence test results, reading test results, personality test results, and adjustment test results can be found in the cumulative record. Many cumulative records contain an analysis sheet which former teachers fill out. This analysis sheet contains the strengths and weaknesses of the child, as expressed by former teachers. One must realize that this is only opinion and is always subject to change.

There is also evidence which supports the view that past achievement might be a detrimental criteria for grouping pupils.<sup>1</sup> This detrimental situation can be illustrated by the child who was a member of the middle group the previous year. If the child's attitudes and performance have changed, he will not be happy in the middle group during the coming year. Upon being changed to a different group, the child, many times, will show academic improvement. This improvement usually has a good effect on

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<sup>1</sup> Willard B. Spalding, The Nongraded Elementary School, (New York, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959), pp. 18-19.



the child's personality and social adjustment.

Teachers must keep in mind the shortcomings of past achievement. They should not use past achievement as the sole criterion for grouping. Instead, they should use this basis as one measure for arriving at intraclass groups.

INTEREST. A third basis for pupil grouping is interest. This basis is used primarily in curricular areas which do not involve rigorous mastery of skills and concepts. Interest grouping is usually done for short periods of time. To cite an example in social studies of a class studying Russia, there would be an opportunity to group according to interest. Students would be interested in various phases of Russia, such as, government, religion, agriculture, dress, military, history, topography, homes, customs, and atomic progress. On the basis of their interests, the teacher could organize groups. After the groups have done research and discussed their problem, they could then, with the teacher's help, relate their findings to the entire class.

Other areas where interest grouping can be used are in hobbies and special class reports. It is desirable for children of different abilities to work together. Making a microscope, a barometer, or working on an insect collection are ways this may be achieved.

The advantage to this basis of grouping is that children join a

group because they already have an interest in the activity underway and do not need much motivation. Frequently the interest can overcome, to a certain degree, the lack of skill or ability on a part of the group. However, it is conceivable that the differences in ability may cause a minor problem.<sup>1</sup>

**SPECIAL NEEDS.** A fourth basis for grouping may be classified according to special needs. There is awareness on the part of educators that in curricular areas such as reading, language, and arithmetic, there are fast, slow, and average students who have difficulty with particular skills. It is suggested that these problem areas be studied by those weak in the area and that no ability or mental criterion be used to form the basis of the grouping. It is not advocated that this basis for grouping be used for long periods of time, such as a half or whole year, but instead, it is usually used for short periods of study.

An example of "special need" grouping might be found in a sixth grade reading class. There are students within the class who have difficulty with phonics, vocabulary, speed, or comprehension. It is advocated that all students with one of these problems meet together as a group to

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<sup>1</sup> Spalding, op. cit., pp. 93-95.

study their particular problem. This study will be done in addition to regular classroom work. While the special group is meeting, the remainder of the class could be progressing with a daily assignment.

"Special Need" grouping can also be used in areas other than academic subjects. Students who have social, speech, or adjustment problems in common could benefit from "special need" grouping. This type of grouping is advocated whenever students have problems in common.

The advantage to "special need" grouping is that children's individual needs are met in a manner which uses the teacher's time effectively. This type of grouping requires much skill by the teacher and is not recommended for beginning teachers.<sup>1</sup>

SEX. Another basis used to form groups is sex. This is primarily used in special classes such as health and physical education. In physical education, boys and girls will need and do have different activities. The boys in physical education will need games which test and require physical strength as well as endurance. The girls' activities would be lighter in form. Similar games might be played, but different rules would be used. These rules require less physical strength and

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<sup>1</sup> Nellie Morrison, "Instead of Ability Grouping - What?", Childhood Education, XXX (April, 1960), pp. 371-373.

endurance on the part of the girl; thus, the girls and boys actually could not participate in the same program.

In an academic subject such as health, it would be desirable to group according to sex in the study of body functions. To cite a specific example, in the Arthur Junior High School, the seventh grade woman teacher teaches a health unit to all seventh grade girls, while the seventh grade man teacher, teaches a unit to all seventh grade boys. This is advantageous because many personal problems can be discussed by the woman teacher, such as menstruation, body cleanliness, and good grooming habits.

From the preceding discussion of sex as a basis for grouping, it is evident that sex is not used to a great extent in the grouping of academic subjects. However, one must remember, that it is a valuable basis for grouping in specific areas.

ACCIDENTAL HOMOGENEOUS METHOD. The accidental homogeneous method is another basis for grouping. This method does not require regrouping the heterogeneously formed class. This method is used primarily in the reading which pupils do on their own. To cite an example, all of the outside reading materials are made accessible to all students. It is hoped that each will use them in regard to his ability. Thus, a person reading on third grade level would read a third grade book.

A person reading at sixth grade level would read a sixth grade book.

Of course, the weakness in this basis for grouping is that just because materials are there does not assure that the child will use them properly. However, it is worth a trial, because many students may read the materials at their particular level of reading ability.

There have been six bases for arriving at pupil grouping mentioned in the preceding section of this paper. It must be remembered that no one method or testing device can accurately form the basis of a group. Therefore, several criteria must be used in the formation of groups in addition to the present teacher opinion, which is certainly one of the major basis for grouping in any situation.

## CHAPTER III

### PROBLEMS IN INTRACLASS GROUPING

There are many problems confronting teachers in the intraclass grouping situation. Seven of these problems are numerated:

1. How large should a group be? How many groups should there be within a given classroom?
2. How is time to be allotted so that all students are going to receive high quality instruction?
3. Should a group have a name or some form of identification?
4. How is the teacher to acquire all of the materials needed to teach more than one group?
5. Should a group be static and unchangeable or should it be flexible?
6. What should be included in the slower groups' curriculum as compared to the remainder of the class?
7. How are the various groups to be graded or evaluated so that each child feels he is being treated fairly?

It should be kept in mind that the following discussion is not in itself the only answer to the preceding problems. Instead, it is merely a suggested solution.

**SIZE AND NUMBER.**        The number of groups organized in a classroom depends upon several things. At the beginning of the first grade, three groups appear ideal. These are organized largely on the basis of reading readiness development. Later in the year, as the

children learn to co-operate in group work, as the spread in reading performance increases, and as the teacher acquires a more thorough understanding of specific pupil's needs, additional groups may be formed. At levels beyond the first grade, it is frequently advisable to begin the year with three groups and add others as the teacher becomes better acquainted with the pupils and their needs.

At any grade level, the number of groups tend to vary between two and five. The size of a group depends largely upon the number of pupils in a class with relatively common needs and interests. In primary grades there may be five to ten children in a group. Even at the more mature levels in the upper grades, the maximum should not exceed twelve to fifteen pupils.<sup>1</sup>

It would be undesirable to set inflexible rules regulating group size. Instead, there are principles which can be kept in mind during the organizing of groups. A group, in which pupils require a lot of attention, should be kept relatively small. In dealing with two or three groups, it is advisable to make the lower group the smallest in number. Groups established on the basis of special needs or interest can be of any

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<sup>1</sup> Miles A. Tinker, Teaching Elementary Reading, (New York, New York: Appleton-Century-Crafts, Inc., 1952), pp. 203-208.

size.<sup>1</sup>

It must be remembered that it is primarily up to the individual teacher to decide the size of a group because the method that succeeds in one classroom situation may not succeed in another.<sup>2</sup>

**TIME.** Time must be given a considerable amount of thought if there is to be a good grouping program within a subject matter area. If not properly organized, the program will be worthless. The major problem of keeping other groups busy while helping one group is one that is not easily solved. The key is planning in advance those activities which challenge the groups that the teacher is not addressing verbally. This can be done by giving various workbook assignments, composition work, reading materials, and other types of assignments that can be done by the child at his seat. However, the teacher should be cautious not to let his work become busy work or work without purpose.

A teacher must realize that his time should be divided as equally as possible among the groups because it is important that each child be taught long enough each day to show him that he is making progress within his group.

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<sup>1</sup> Albert J. Harris, How To Increase Reading Ability, (III; New York, New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1956), p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> Willard Abraham, "A New Look At Reading," Elementary English, XXXI (February, 1954), pp. 142-143.



**NAMES.** Teachers have been concerned, in the past, about letting children know the ability of their particular group. They have named groups one, two, and three, or Redbirds, Bluebirds, and Robins, to prevent the child from learning the ability of his particular group. Today the general concensus among educators is that inevitably a child will find out the range of ability group in which he is a member; thus, a teacher must be alert not to label or suggest inferior work, nor allow other students to label or suggest inferiority. If this is done, the problem, at least in part, will be alleviated.

**MATERIALS.** Material is the key to grouping success, and teachers should strive to place as much material as possible before their youngsters. Many of our schools today do not have a rich selection of materials at the disposal of their teachers. However, many materials can be obtained through teacher co-operation. If teachers, when requisitioning materials for the coming year, will meet together and order different supplementary materials, a vast amount can be obtained.

Many teaching materials can be made by the teacher. For example, in arithmetic such things as an abacus, counting board, perimeter board, fraction kit, and flash cards are only samples of the many that a teacher could make with a small amount of material. Other materials, such as, filmstrips, movies, slides, and books can be obtained free through industry, or through state, county and city libraries.

**FLEXIBILITY.**        Grouping should not be static; instead it should be flexible. Grouping should be flexible enough to allow the re-grouping of a child from one group to another, if his needs can be better met there. However, one should make sure that the child is properly prepared for a change in groups. If he is not, he may become frustrated. As a result, much progress, which had been made, could be lost.

Grouping should also be flexible enough to enable the child to participate in groups that differ from time to time. In this way the child will be with new youngsters and will have an opportunity to maintain his social status among his peers. Groups or pupils should not be changed just for the sake of change. Flexibility has importance when it serves to improve the child mentally and socially, but let us keep in mind that too much flexibility is as bad as too little.<sup>1</sup>

**CURRICULUM.**        It is evident that curriculum must play a role in grouping. The curriculum is limited in the primary grades. Thus, we find children being grouped, in the primary grades, almost solely in reading classes. As the child progresses through school and as individual differences are expanded, grouping is done in other academic subjects. The junior high school youngster is grouped in more academic

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, op. cit., p. 133.

subjects than any other level of the elementary school because at the junior high school level grouping is performed to various degrees in reading, language, social studies, and arithmetic. Of course, the amount of grouping will vary from classroom to classroom and from school to school.

Curriculum is extremely important in providing a desirable grouping situation. It is agreed that all students need to learn certain basic concepts. The fast student will learn these basic concepts quickly. He then should be provided with advanced and more difficult materials. The slower student poses another problem. He will move at a slow rate and must have concepts and ideas repeated. In this situation, the teacher is not to give advanced work, but instead, the teacher should find new and simple ways of explaining the basic required concepts. At the same time, the teacher must hold the interest level of the slow learner at a high peak.

In reading, this situation exists. The same basic skills and concepts can be taught with different ability level texts. On the market today are readers and textbooks written on various reading levels. These books contain the same stories but are on different reading levels. It would certainly be advantageous if children of all groups in the classroom could read the same stories, and at least, in part, grasp like concepts.

It is important that lines of communication be kept open between all groups involved in the reading program.

EVALUATION. In any school situation, grading is required. Because of this requirement, teachers are faced with the problem of reporting to parents. Before a grade is given, agreement of what the grade means in terms of effort and progress must be understood by the child, parents, and teacher. This agreement could best be reached by discussion. Ideally, parents at the beginning of the school year, could be invited to school. This will give the teacher an opportunity to explain how he is going to grade the pupil, and it will also give parents an opportunity to ask questions so that a clear understanding of grading exists between parents and teacher.

There are three possible methods of grading a child within a group. First, he may be marked in comparison to his own ability. Second, he may be marked in comparison to the entire class, including all of its groups. Third, he may be marked in comparison to his peer group achievement. Although there is argument for all three types of grading, the evidence favors marking the child in comparison to the entire class, including all of its groups.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond H. Harrison and Lawrence E. Gowin, The Elementary Teacher in Action, (San Francisco, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1959), pp. 166-167.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

Due to a lack of evidence, a clear advantage for homogeneous grouping or heterogeneous grouping does not exist. As was indicated in this paper, there were good arguments favoring either method of grouping. However, only an ignorant person could think that all boys and girls of the same age are alike, and only a mechanical teacher would try to make them so. It becomes the duty of teachers to provide for the spread of six to ten years of ability, which is present in most any self-contained classroom.<sup>1</sup> It is evident that a majority of classroom teachers do regroup, at least in some subject areas, their heterogeneously formed classrooms. This regrouping never results in groups which are homogeneous, but it may result in groups that are less heterogeneous in terms of specific characteristics than the class as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

Grouping cannot always be predetermined. The teacher should form groups for a need or a purpose. He should modify methods of grouping to meet the needs of the child at a particular time. More than one

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<sup>1</sup> Fred T. Whilhelms, "Grouping Within the Elementary Classroom," National Education Association Journal, XXXXVIII (September, 1959), pp. 19-21.

<sup>2</sup> Petty, op. cit., p. 181.

basis for grouping may be in operation in the classroom at the same time.<sup>1</sup> It is through the use of many criteria that the child is placed in proper groups, thus enabling him to learn to the fullest of his capacity.

A teacher should not forget that a homeroom, as a whole, is a group. Teachers should strive to build it up. They should not be so preoccupied with handling it in groups that the homeroom loses its force and unity. Grouping isn't a way of teaching, but instead, it is simply a technique of classroom management that helps the teacher create an environment in which he can better teach.

Four generalizations may be cited here for creating a desirable grouping situation. First, the purpose of the American Public School is to educate the child to the best of his ability, so that he may become a productive citizen of our society.

Second, the value of public relations must be remembered. Parents and other concerned people must have a full understanding of the teacher's and school's goals.

Third, the program must be continuous and comprehensive, for no program can meet its purpose in education unless these qualities exist.

Fourth, there are problems in any grouping situation which are

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<sup>1</sup> Wrightstone, op. cit., p. 25.

common. However, grouping or any other educational program will not necessarily fit two school systems. Each school and each classroom have problems of their own, and these must be solved independently of other school systems, if the needs of the student are to be met.

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